Residents Learn About Services at Disabilities Awareness Day

Today's Sunbeam Friday, July 30, 2007 By Robert Linnehan

Pennsville Twp. – Representatives of the Salem County Office for the Disabled, county officials, and vendors came together Thursday morning for the 3rd Annual Disabilities Awareness Day here.

The annual event at J.G. Cook's Riverview Inn gave county residents and their families, friends, parents, and support staff an opportunity to learn of the different services offered to them in Salem County.

Debbie Behnke, director of the Salem County Office for the Disabled, organized the event and welcomed over 100 interested residents to the meeting.

The day featured seven speakers who detailed the various services Salem County and the state offers to people with disabilities. State Sen. Stephen Sweeney, D-3rd Dist., and Peggy Butler of the Salem County Board of Elections were among the featured speakers.

"We're bringing people with disabilities together to see what the county has to offer," Behnke said. "People need services and we are able to introduce them to different vendors who offer services they didn't even know existed in the county."

Several members of the Salem County Board of Chosen Freeholders were on hand for the event. Freeholder Director Lee Ware, County Administrator Earl Gage, and Freeholders Julie Acton and Jeff Hogan addressed the assembled audience at the start of the day.

"We come together on this day to celebrate and work with the disabled community of Salem County," Ware said. "I pledge to you that we will continue to not just work with you today, but everyday, to meet your needs as a celebrated segment of our county's population."

Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-3rd Dist., praised Behnke and her staff- Kathy Massey and Myrt Mungioli- for another great program and also thanked those in the audience for coming.

"Everyone has something to give back to the community. Ten years ago there wasn't a program like this, we've really come a long way thanks to Debbie and her staff," he said.

About 35 vendors were present and gave away free literature to people browsing their stands. Melinda Lodge and Darcie Bear of the South Jersey Healthcare Adult Day Care program said the Disabilities Awareness Day allowed the disabled community of Salem County to converge at one location to research numerous service care providers.

"Many people don't know where to look to find the resources they need," Lodge said. "It's a very beneficial program for people who want to come somewhere for what's best described as one-stop shopping."

Paul Marich of Quinton Township was attending his second awareness day and commended Behnke for her work with the county's disabled community. The Salem County Office for the Disabled helped construct a wheelchair ramp at his home last year when Marich suffered a serious back injury.

Marich attended the event with his grandson Jeffrey.

"I've really enjoyed this day. There's so much information, I didn't know half of the services offered to the disabled in Salem County," he said. "What Debbie is doing for the disabled community is just wonderful."

Sami Nicolaisen of Woodstown said the event made her feel honored to be a resident of Salem County. Nicolaisen and her husband Gary attended the event for the first time.

"I'm shocked at how great this is. There's so much information here," she said. "We've found so many services offered through Salem County we had no idea about. I'm just truly impressed and we thank those who made this possible for us."